HOOKED on e-mail

Information overload, and an expectation that e-mails, tweets and text messages will be answered immediately, impact productivity. Here's how to fight the digital attack.

E-mails have become a conditioned response, just like Pavlov's dog. We hear the alert and open the e-mail because, of course, you know it's important. Yet, what if it's not important, and you ignore it, and it turns out that it really WAS important and you ignored it… Oh, the pressure is giving me a headache!

Easy-to-access, digitized content has replaced the need to physically acquire information from a library, write and mail a letter, carry a steno-pad, use a typewriter and more.

E-mails, texts, tweets, Facebook, voice mail, BlackBerrys, Google, blogs, wikis, instant messages, forums, LinkedIn, Internet, and corporate intranets have made gathering and processing information overwhelming. The younger, information-addicted workers have a greater capacity to process this open floodgate of information, as well as a better ability to multi task. The constant streams of new input coming at us, combined with the social expectation that every e-mail, tweet, text and IM will be answered immediately, can zap our energy and destroy those few remaining brain cells.

Productivity and e-mails

Research suggests that there is a marked drop in worker productivity because of e-mail, phone and social networking interruptions. A study by Intel (Zeldes, 2007) found it took people an average of 25 minutes to get back to work following an e-mail interruption.

Another study (Knight, 2005) reported that the IQ scores of knowledge workers distracted by e-mail and phone calls fell from their normal level by an average of 10 points, twice the decline recorded for those smoking marijuana. (Just imagine what happens to those who smoke pot while going through their e-mails!)

A 2008 study from AOL found that out of 4,000 e-mail users in the United States, 46 percent admitted to being "hooked" on e-mail. It appears possible that this "always available" information stream can impact our productivity, family relationships and health.

Blurring the boundaries between work and home

Easy access, via technology, can affect personal lives when individuals cannot manage to separate work and home. Where and when do you check your e-mails, texts and tweets? Many admit to checking e-mails while driving, in church, and in the bathroom, and some confess to the fact that they've hidden their e-mail checking from others.

By Kathy Espinoza

Blackberry orphans are defined as children who desperately fight to regain their parents' attention from their device. Car rides, once a place to talk with family without TV or phone distractions, are almost non-existent. At work, the lines blur with employee access to Facebook and other social media. What happens when a co-worker calls in sick to work and subsequently posts pictures online of her and the family at an amusement park?

E-mail: The ultimate overload

Serious amounts of time are wasted on e-mails, as most employees spend up to two hours a day processing them. At Intel, Zeldes (2007) surveyed 2,300 employees and found that average employees receive 350 messages a week, and executives about 300 per day. What price does an organization pay for individuals trying to manage all this information?

If all e-mail, text and tweet information was valuable, that would be one thing, but it's not. Yet the risk of assuming an e-mail is not important is outweighed by the fear of ignoring it now, only to find out later its value. We choose to err on the side of opening and reacting to every e-mail, which is counter-productive. The Intel survey found that employees judged one-third of the messages received to be "unnecessary."

E-mail apnea

One expert on adult ADD (Stone, 2008), coined the term "e-mail apnea" as the unconscious suspension of regular and steady breathing when people tackle their e-mails. As I read this, I realized that I do hold my breath when reading something important and hitting the reply and text actions. Stone feels that holding the breath is a stress response from not being able to process information as quickly as it arrives.

E-mail indecision

E-mail makes it easy to solicit information from colleagues and supervisors, but there is a drawback when it comes to making the decision. Sending requests via e-mail carry the probability of a forced delay in decision making when you don't know when the receiver will answer the e-mail message. Did they receive the message? Are they ignoring it? Did it end up in their junk mail folder inadvertently? Has it been overlooked in their already bulging inbox? Do I dare send a reminder about the initial e-mail and risk being a further annoyance?

Help for e-mail sufferers

The problem with e-mail is the difficulty in figuring out what is urgent and needs attention now, versus what's important but doesn't need immediate attention. New software tools are being developed that are more intuitive and able to distinguish urgent e-mail messages from those that are important but don't require immediate attention. They can look at your history with senders, track importance level by separating in-house e-mail from all client e-mail, filter e-mail for words such as, "as soon as possible," and automatically turn e-mail messages into tasks/appointments.

Personal solutions

Here are some solutions that don't require special software, just a change in habits:

■ Scheduled e-mail checks – Many have said it: "Check your inbox only at scheduled intervals each day;" yet often we don't trust this solution. E-mail anxiety can grow as you wonder if you are missing something important. Try turning off automatic e-mail notifications for incoming messages and check the inbox at scheduled times.

■ Shortened e-mails and responses – Work with peers, staff, yourself and friends on shortening up e-mails sent. Encourage everyone to only include important facts, bullet form if possible.

■ Concise subject line – Don't make the e-mail recipient read and reread your e-mail to try and figure out what you are saying and what you need. Place the topic clearly in the subject line to save them time.

■ E-mail response policy – Decide as an organization who gets an immediate response. For example, all clients get an immediate response, all e-mails sent as "urgent" get an immediate response, and all others will be addressed at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Create an auto-response that lets all in-house senders know your e-mail review schedule and let them know that if it's urgent, to please call you.

Getting back on task

It's hard to put a dollar value on the time spent going through e-mails, handling constant interruptions and the time getting back on task. If you are feeling like you are under digital attack and your ability to take in multiple bits of information at the same time has retired, without telling you, some of the listed steps may help, but you need to trust yourself. These tips can help you maintain your sanity, your relationships and your well-being.

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